

Wovoka

Written by Administrator
Monday, 15 September 2008 13:44 -

Wovoka

Grandfather says that when your friends die you must not cry. You must not anybody or do harm to any

Wovoka - Paiute

You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom ? Then when I die she

You ask me to dig for stones ! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones ? Then when I die I cannot enter h

You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men, but how dare I cut my mot

I want my people to stay with me here. All the dead men will come to life again. Their spirits will come to

Wovoka - Paiute

My young men shall never farm. Men who work the soil cannot dream, and wisdom comes to us in drea

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Known as the messiah to his followers, Wovoka was the Paiute mystic whose religious pronouncements spread the Ghost Dance among many tribes across the American West.

Wovoka (1856-1932), also known as Jack Wilson, was a Northern Paiute religious leader and founder of the Ghost Dance movement. Wovoka means "wood cutter" in the Northern Paiute language.

Wovoka was born in the Smith Valley area southeast of Carson City, Nevada, around the year 1856. Wovoka's father may have been Numu-Taibo ("white person"), a religious leader whose teachings were similar to those of Wovoka. Regardless, Wovoka clearly had some training as a shaman.

Wovoka's father died around the year 1870, and he was taken in by David Wilson, who was a rancher in the Yerington, Nevada area. Wovoka worked on the Wilson ranch, and used the name Jack Wilson in his dealings with whites. David Wilson was a devout Christian, and Wovoka learned English, Christian theology, and bible stories while living with him.

In his early adulthood, Wovoka gained a reputation as a powerful shaman. He was adept at magic tricks. One trick he often performed was being shot with a shotgun, which may have been similar to the bullet catch trick. Reports of this trick may have convinced the Lakota that their "ghost shirts" could stop bullets. Wovoka is also reported to have performed a levitation trick.

In early 1889 Wovoka proclaimed that he had a prophetic vision during the solar eclipse on January 1 of that year. Wovoka vision entailed the resurrection of the Paiute dead and the removal of whites and their works from North America.

To bring this vision to pass, Wovoka taught that they must live righteously and perform a round dance, known as the "Ghost Dance".

At around age thirty, Wovoka began to weave together various cultural strains into the Ghost Dance religion. He had a rich tradition of religious mysticism upon which to draw.

Around 1870, a northern Paiute named Tavibo had prophesied that while all whites would be swallowed up by the Earth, all dead Indians would emerge to enjoy a world free of their conquerors.

He urged his followers to dance in circles, already a tradition in the Great Basin area, while singing religious songs. Tavibo's movement spread to parts of Nevada, California, and Oregon.

Whether or not Tavibo was Wovoka's father, as many at the time assumed, in the late 1880's Wovoka began to make similar prophecies.

His pronouncements heralded the dawning of a new age, in which whites would vanish, leaving Indians to live in a land of material abundance, spiritual renewal and immortal life. Like many millenarian visions, Wovoka's prophecies stressed the link between righteous behavior and imminent salvation. Salvation was not to be passively awaited but welcomed by a regime of ritual dancing and upright moral conduct.

Despite the later association of the Ghost Dance with the Wounded Knee Massacre and unrest on the Lakota reservations, Wovoka charged his followers:

Do not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do not refuse to work for the whites and do not make any trouble with them.

While the Ghost Dance is sometimes seen today as an expression of Indian militancy and the desire to preserve traditional ways, Wovoka's pronouncements ironically bore the heavy mark of popular Christianity.

Wovoka's invocation of a "Supreme Being," immortality, pacifism and explicit mentions of Jesus (often referred to with such phrases as "the messiah who came once to live on Earth with the white man but was killed by them") all speak of an infusion of Christian beliefs into Paiute mysticism.

The Ghost Dance spread throughout much of the West, especially among the more recently

defeated Indians of the Great Plains. Local bands would adopt the core of the message to their own circumstances, writing their their own songs and dancing their own dances.

In 1889 the Lakota sent a delegation to visit Wovoka. This group brought the Ghost Dance back to their reservations, where believers made sacred shirts -- said to be bullet-proof -- especially for the Dance.

The slaughter of Big Foot's band at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890 was cruel proof that whites were not about to simply vanish, that the millennium was not at hand. Wovoka quickly lost his notoriety and lived as Jack Wilson until sometime in 1932.

He left the Ghost Dance as evidence of a growing pan-Indian identity which drew upon elements of both white and Indian traditions.

By the morning of January 1, 1889, Wovoka was clearly a man torn apart by the conflicts of his past. His father's failure to be taken seriously as a prophet, the suffering of the Native peoples and his own religious concepts (both tribal and Christian) weighed heavily on him. On that day, Wovoka claimed to have dreamed a vision of a new and glorious world for the Native peoples. But was it really a new world?

In his dream, Wovoka conversed with God, who promised a new world set aside for the Native peoples. The wildlife of the region which was nearly depleted by white settlers (buffalo, elk, deer) would be replenished. The white settlers would vanish en mass and the Native dead would be resurrected and reunited with their living ancestors. Suffering, starvation, pain and disease would be wiped away forever. From a theological viewpoint and the safety of hindsight, however, one can detect prophecies which were not tribal in origin.

Even the most casual churchgoer would recognize the visions of the Book of Revelation in Wovoka's prophecies. Yet Wovoka's audience - the Paiute people and, later, other tribal nations - did not recognize it simply because Christianity did not take root among the Native peoples. White missionaries, for all of their efforts, did not put their faith into the hearts of most Native peoples. Wovoka, obviously recognizing this, refashioned the Revelation warning to his world.

He claimed the Native peoples would receive God's favor since it was the white man who rejected Christ. And unlike the New Testament, which was vague concerning the time and place of God's new world, Wovoka spelled out the immediacy of what he said. "Jesus is now upon the Earth," he stated. But again, there is historic contradiction here- Wovoka is quoted as saying he was Christ and he wasn't Christ. It would seem that either he excelled at playing to different audiences or was damned to being preserved by faulty historians.

Wovoka added this new world for Native peoples would come, but only if a ritualistic dance was practiced. In his initial preaching, he instructed his audiences to dance five days and four nights, then bathe in a river and go home. Wovoka promised to send a good spirit to his followers, who were to return in three months, at which time he would promise "such rain as I have never given you before."

The ritualistic dance, which became known as Ghost Dance, clearly appealed to the Native peoples who were baffled by the pew-bound protocol of Christian faiths. Unlike the calls of his father Tavibo, Wovoka found an audience eager to follow his teachings.

Ghost Dance spread to different nations throughout the west with a speed and ferocity unrivaled by any religious frenzy of the day. This turn of events was all the more remarkable for three reasons: the geographic and language barriers among the various nations, the lack of access to media or technology for spreading this news, and the fact that Wovoka never left the Paiute land.

Instead, members of other nations came to Nevada to learn from him. Why Wovoka did not travel could be attributed to either a fear of unknown territories, a lack of funds to accommodate travel or even the possibility of enemies.

In the summer of 1890, among those who visited Wovoka were two members of the Lakota reservation at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, named Kicking Bear and Short Bull.

They became enraptured by Wovoka's faith and even stated that Wovoka levitated through the air above them. Kicking Bear and Short Bull brought Ghost Dance back to Pine Ridge, but in a very different form which led to totally unexpected results.

Wovoka's faith was based on non-violence with whites. In fact, he even urged his followers not to tell the whites what they were doing. But as interpreted by Kicking Bear and Short Bull, Ghost Dance took on a militaristic aspect. Special garments known as Ghost Shirts were to be worn to deflect bullets fired by white soldiers or settlers. Government agents were permitted to witness the Ghost Dance ceremony and were told what it meant. Kicking Bear and Short Bull added the Indian Messiah would appear to the Lakota in the Spring of 1891.

Ghost Dance came to the Lakota with a fury. All activity at the Pine Ridge Reservation was put aside and the Native peoples adopted this faith with a mania. Government agents and white settlers were terrified by this sudden and (to them) bizarre turn of events. Newspapers spread stories of savage Indians in wild pagan practices.

Tensions became overpowering in this region as the Lakota people gave all their waking hours to Ghost Dance. (One government agent, Daniel F. Royer, tried to distract the Lakota by bringing his nephew to Pine Ridge to introduce baseball. It did not work. A missionary named Catherine Weldon offered to debate Kicking Bear on religion, but nothing came of it.)

Blame for Ghost Dance was placed on two people. Wovoka was traced as the father of the Ghost Dance and was interviewed by James Mooney, an ethnologist and anthropologist with the Smithsonian Institute. Wovoka passed a message to Mooney that he would control any militaristic uprising among the Native peoples in return for financial and food compensation from Washington.

The offer was ignored. And blame was also put on Sitting Bull, the chief medicine man of the Lakota people. Ironically, Sitting Bull was apathetic to Ghost Dance and only allowed its introduction at Pine Ridge with great caution. His initial qualms were realized: government agents considered Sitting Bull responsible solely due to his leadership role among the Lakota. Tribal police were dispatched to arrest him, but his apprehension resulted in conflict when several Lakota fought to protect him. Sitting Bull was killed in the crossfire on December 15, 1890.

Fourteen days after Sitting Bull's fatal shooting, the U.S. Army sought to relocate and disarm the Lakota people, who failed to stop their Ghost Dance. On the frozen plains at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation, government troops opened fire on the overwhelmingly unarmed Lakota people, killing 290 in a matter of minutes. Thirty-three soldiers died, most from friendly fire; 20 Medals of Honor were presented to surviving soldiers.

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As news of Wounded Knee spread throughout the Native nations, Ghost Dance died quickly. Wovoka's prophecies were hollow; the land would not be returned from the white man through divine intervention. With the suddenness of its birth, Ghost Dance disappeared.

Wovoka himself virtually vanished into obscurity. In his later years, he exhibited himself at sideshows in county fairs and worked as an extra in silent movie Westerns. (The one surviving photograph of Wovoka was taken on the set of a film.) By the time of his death on September 20, 1932, he was virtually forgotten by both white and Native peoples. It would not be until the 1970s and the birth of Native American activism that the story of the Ghost Dance was told again, even if its father's life was reduced to footnote status.

The tragedy of Wovoka is a legacy of pain and suffering among the very people he wanted to save. The songs of the Ghost Dance are silent today and the dream of Wovoka vanished in the harsh light of reality. The Christian principles which he laced into his theology were brutally ignored by the soldiers and settlers who held allegiance to Christ and yet destroyed the Native way of life with a brutality unknown in the Gospel teachings.

- James Mooney, *The Ghost-dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*